

# Written Ministerial Statement

*The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.*

## Department for Communities

### UPDATE ON NI HOUSING EXECUTIVE OUT OF HOURS SERVICE

*Published at 10am on Friday 22 May 2026*

**Mr Lyons (The Minister for Communities):** In recent months there has been an increased focus on the Housing Executive and the operation of its Out of Hours Service.

Some recent statements, particularly around the Housing Executive's alleged failings to provide temporary accommodation and indeed fulfil their statutory duty to those at risk of rough sleeping, have revealed a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Out of Hours Service.

The Out of Hours service was not designed or intended to be a 24 / 7 continuation of the day service. This would be impossible. It was designed to enable the Housing Executive to provide an emergency response to a homeless crisis when its offices are closed, for example where a victim of domestic abuse must flee their home with no warning.

However, over 70% of all contacts to the out of hours service are already known to the Housing Executive and have Full Duty Applicant status. While Housing Advisors will always work to identify an appropriate placement for those to whom the Housing Executive owes a duty, applicants must be encouraged to engage with the day service for the advice, assistance and support required.

The day service has considerably more options and resources available to help presenters. The Out of Hours service is required to ensure the applicant requires, and has entitlement to, temporary accommodation. The Housing Advisor will then explore placements across a range of options, following a risk assessment to ensure a safe, suitable placement.

We must all recognise the challenging operating environment in which the Housing Executive is working. The complexity of need among the homeless cohort has increased significantly, for example as a result of mental health or addiction issues. Housing Advisors may not always be able to respond with an immediate accommodation offer. Not only must they determine availability, but they must risk-assess each case so they can make a suitable offer of placement that puts neither the individual, nor fellow residents or staff at risk.

The fact that applicants may have to wait for the Housing Executive to call back with details of a placement should not be confused with the Housing Executive not meeting its statutory duty.

Regarding delivery of the service, I sought and was provided with assurances from the Housing Executive in relation to how it continues to meet its statutory obligations to provide temporary accommodation. To test these assurances my officials then requested, received and tested data from the Welcome Organisation's street outreach teams – in relation to 12 randomly-selected dates, between March 25 and April 26, inclusive of dates when SWEP was in operation, and **established no evidence of a systematic failure by the Housing Executive to meet its statutory duty.**

Of the 255 engagements observed across the 12 nights sampled, 8 cases were recorded as not receiving a call back or there being no suitable accommodation available. Each of these cases was investigated. In 6 instances, contact with the applicant was lost due to them not having a phone or their whereabouts being unknown. In the remaining 2 cases, the Housing Executive could find no record of the applicant contacting them on that particular date.

My officials and I also saw first-hand the service which is provided daily by the Welcome Organisation to those at risk of rough sleeping. When I visited them, I saw just how difficult the service it provides is, late at night and in all weathers. The client group often has very complex needs and their lifestyles

can be chaotic. I am concerned that some of the commentary last winter about their service will have been dispiriting. The data reported daily by the Welcome Organisation to the Housing Executive should be regarded as the proper source of information for the performance of the Out of Hours service in addressing rough sleeping both within and without SWEP. The importance of this is the obligation we all owe to support those who are working often beyond the call in very difficult circumstances to meet the needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens. They deserve accurate reports of the service they work so hard to provide.

The Housing Executive is currently implementing a change-management process to transition to a new and distinct Emergency Homelessness Line which should ensure the long-term sustainability of the service.

As part of this process officials will engage with service providers, and voluntary sector groups who provide help to those experiencing homelessness, to identify where challenges remain and draw on any lessons learned.

My officials will at relevant points repeat the data-exercise summarised above to maintain this assurance and to further support my ability to pass this on to the Assembly.

Reassurance should not be interpreted as complacency. The causes of homelessness and rough sleeping are complex. They extend beyond accommodation and relate to the responsibilities of a range of Departments. This will also be true of the solutions. I agree with recent reports from the Northern Ireland Audit Office, Public Accounts Committee and Committee for Communities that all, in varying ways, make this point. It is a point illustrated by successful developments such as the New Foundations Programme.

I know there is strong cross-party agreement on the importance of tackling the complex causes of homelessness and rough sleeping. I look forward to strong, non-partisan collaboration on this issue in the future.